

The Pathway to Success: A Case Study of *National Geographic*

MA Xiao, MA Jun-jie

United International College, Zhuhai, China

National Geographic has become a popular magazine all over the world. Its spectacular success roots in three aspects: the economic aspect, the cultural aspect, and the social aspect. More specifically, its overseas expansion strategy and one-to-one membership system, its diverse cultural connotation, as well as its role in arousing audiences' responses from the natural predicaments help it become successful. Besides, *National Geographic* also brings profound enlightenments to the world publishing industry.

Keywords: magazine, strategy, nature and humanity issues, cultural and social resources

Introduction

National Geographic has existed for around 130 years. This magazine is one of the most successful publications throughout the world, and it has the fourth largest circulation in the world. Based on the researches, due to the implementation of the overseas expansion strategy and one-to-one membership system, as well as drawing on cultural, natural, and social resources to arouse audience's interests towards nature and humanity issues, *National Geographic* earns the enduring popularity and becomes one of the most widely read magazines in the world today.

The Overseas Expansion and the One-to-One Membership System

First of all, *National Geographic* has achieved great economic success with its unique overseas expansion strategy and one-to-one membership system. On the one hand, through cooperation with overseas markets, *National Geographic* has launched many "derivatives", that is the various magazines with local characteristics and contents. Morley and Robins assert that 10%-15% of the contents in these overseas editions are collected and written by respective local editors (Morley & Robins, 2004, p. 265). Due to reflecting some local news and related comments, the overseas editions of the magazine have a stronger attraction than the original edition for local readers. Furthermore, through cooperation with China, Spain, and other countries, *National Geographic* has launched a series of "sister journals" and acquired enormous circulations (Morley & Robins, 2004, p. 347). Among them, *National Geographic Viajes* has become the most successful travel magazine in Spain. What's more, the *National Geographic Traveler* published in China exceeded 400,000 copies in the first month.

MA Xiao, Bachelor of Arts, Programme of English Language and Literature Studies, United International College, Zhuhai, China.

MA Jun-jie, Bachelor of Arts, Programme of English Language and Literature Studies, United International College, Zhuhai, China.

On the other hand, by adopting the form of one-to-one membership subscription system, *National Geographic* makes readers feel the user-friendly service, thus increasing the reputation of the magazine. According to Chernatony, McDonald, and Wallace, a unit or individual can become the membership of the National Geographic Association by paying a membership fee, that is, by paying the “subscription fee” for *National Geographic* magazine (Chernatony, McDonald, & Wallace, 2011, p. 289). In this way, *National Geographic* sells through the association’s website and rarely at newsstands to protect memberships’ interests. This unique way of launch enables *National Geographic* to enter American families smoothly, realizing the surge of circulation. Moreover, this membership system requires each member to provide relevant personal information. From Chernatony et al.’s point of view, this enables *National Geographic* to master the information of each reader, so as to understand their needs and carry out “one-to-one service” (Chernatony et al., 2011, p. 292). This system makes the subscription of the magazine become a kind of humanized communication, and also enables the editors to focus on the content of the magazine rather than the advertising profit. Thus, the magazine’s quality is greatly improved.

Comprehensive Magazine Content Showing Different Cultures

One factor for *National Geographic* to succeed is that it takes some niche cultures as examples to make the content interesting and arouse readers’ attention. Also, by drawing attention to a certain culture, it indirectly protects this culture. According to Xu, *National Geographic* contains comprehensive magazine content showing different cultures (Xu, 2008). Among all the different cultures, readers may find one or two niche cultures so attractive that they even want to pay a visit to those places by themselves. For example, there is one issue of *National Geographic* focusing on the life of Mongolian golden eagle hunters. From the images and texts in that particular issue, readers can know how a Mongolian hunter trains a golden eagle and makes it become his hunting partner. Through narrating a story about an old man who has been a golden eagle hunter for almost 20 years, the magazine succeeds in promoting Mongolian hunting culture, and demonstrates a balance between human and nature. Golden eagle hunter is a dying profession, but the spirit and the cultural background of this special occupation have a chance to survive thanks to the records in *National Geographic*. Another example is about a programme called “Tracing Heritage” which aims to let the audience be familiar with Taiwanese village culture. Throughout this programme, *National Geographic* tries to record some dying cultures in Taiwan, and it uses a foreigner’s point of view to explore the attractive points lying in Taiwanese culture. From these two examples, we can see that *National Geographic* is trying to use its own influence to help some dying cultures to survive. Such a positive objective not only attracts local audience, but appeals to readers outside these niche cultures as well.

Reflect Different Natural Problems to Arouse Audience’s Awareness

In addition to showing different cultures, *National Geographic* also reflects different natural problems to arouse audience’s awareness towards their own society, which is another important factor for this magazine to succeed. According to Zhu, the executive institution of the magazine is complex and its members cover all aspects of society, which helps the magazine show different aspects of the society (Zhu, 2008). For example, bases on Zhu’s study, when the executive institution was first established in 1888, it contained explorers, lawyers,

teachers, photographers, and so on (Zhu, 2008). These members with different occupations had the same interest, which was exploring nature, so they set up National Geographic Society and started to publish *National Geographic*, in order to popularize geographical knowledge (Zhu, 2008). The diversity of the institution members helps the magazine reflect nature in different aspects. Moreover, from the contents of some issues of *National Geographic*, we can get in-depth understandings of some main natural problems such as climate change and species extinction. By drawing on these natural issues, *National Geographic* makes the audience reflect on these issues' influence on their own society. For example, one issue of *National Geographic* focuses on the extinction of rhinos. Through the images and the texts, the magazine tells the readers that rhinos are seriously endangered. The issue's cover directly asks the readers a question: "What we lose when an animal goes extinct?" In this way, the magazine makes the readers deeply reflect on their own living society, and succeeds in catching the readers' attention. There is another issue of *National Geographic* focusing on the climate change, and it draws the readers' attention on ice melting in the Arctic. From this example, we can see that *National Geographic* not only aims to report natural problems, but uses these natural issues to make the readers think what they can do to save their living world. *National Geographic* has built a "bridge" which links nature and human society, and this connection is one factor that leads this magazine to success.

Conclusion

By implementing the international expansion strategy and one-to-one membership regime, as well as demonstrating comprehensive cultural, natural, and social phenomena, *National Geographic* succeeds in attracting its audience and has become one of the most famous magazines around the world. The influence of *National Geographic* lies in its own brand on the social cognition, social judgment, and other relevant social behaviors as an information dissemination channel. This is one crucial legacy *National Geographic* brings to the magazine industry.

References

- Chernatony, L., McDonald, M., & Wallace, E. (2011). *Creating powerful brands in consumer, service and industrial markets*. Oxford: Elsevier/Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Morley, D., & Robins, K. (2004). *Spaces of identity: Global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Stories of animals, nature, and culture. (27 April 2020). *National Geographic*. Retrieved from www.nationalgeographic.com/
- Xu, G. H. (2008). A carrier that spans time and space: An analysis of the success of National Geographic magazine in its 120th anniversary. *Editors' Friend*, 2, 92-93.
- Zhu, X. E. (2008). Success story of American National Geographic and its implications. *Journal of Ningbo University of Technology*, 20(3), 26-30.